I SPEAK FOR THE BLIND

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

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The author who, though he cannot see, has discovered that he is far from helpless

Steps present no difficulty—he takes them with certainty

I SPEAK FOR THE BLIND

He learned to read and write Braille and use the typewriter

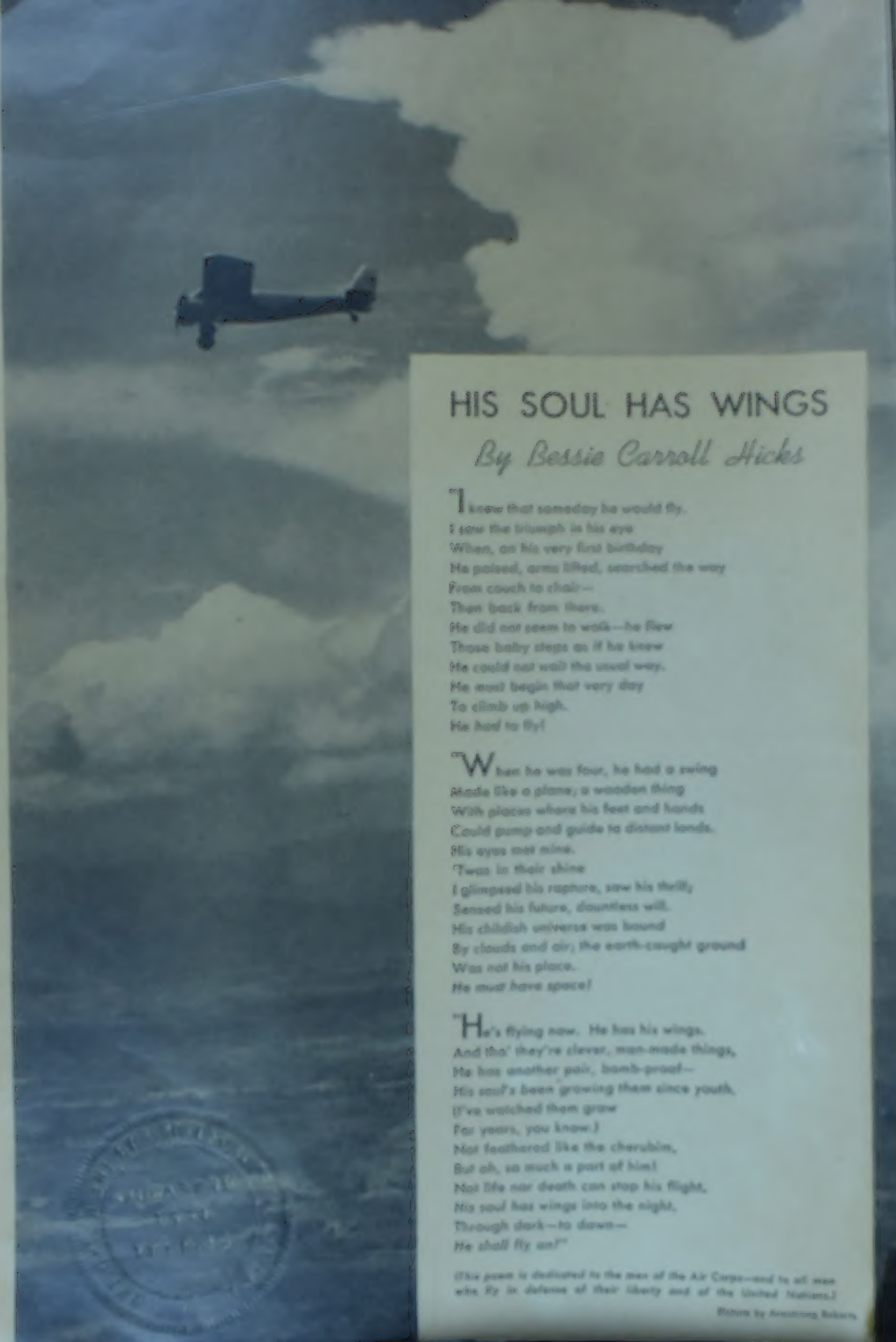
By KARSTEN OHNSTAD

I WAS sixteen when my sight began to fade. My first reaction to the realization that I was going blind was that of fear. Into my mind crowded all the dread things which I had come to associate with blindness—the blind beggar on the street corner shut away in eternal darkness, the old man peddling brooms, stared at by everybody, dependent upon the charity of the few. In my fear I turned to God. Each day I prayed that my sight would not be taken from me, that I would not be condemned to blindness. But the world I had known grew more faded and blurred and the darkness drew closer about me. I was bewildered, confused. As I sat alone in my room, I speculated upon my blindness. Like Job I wondered why this affliction was being brought upon me. Why was I being singled out? Why was I being allowed to go blind?

Then I began to reach for God in another way. I reached for His hand in my darkness, and I touched it, and I was lifted up and strengthened.

Gradually I became accustomed to blindness. My thoughts dwelt less and less upon it. As I pottered about the house I discovered that, even though I could not see, I was not helpless. I could still do many things. I shined shoes, swept floors, made the beds, washed the dishes, scrubbed the porches, mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedge, took care of the chickens. I even rode the little neighbor boy's bicycle all around the lawn until I went too far and found myself sprawled in the middle of the prickly hedge.

At The School for the Blind, I found myself in a new world of activity. The other students, like myself, were blind, but they seemed no different from the boys and girls I had known back in public school. They were as happy and as capable in work and in play as anyone with normal sight. I resumed my



HIS SOUL HAS WINGS

By Bessie Carroll Hicks

"I knew that someday he would fly.
I saw the triumph in his eye
When, on his very first birthday
He poised, arms lifted, searched the way
From couch to chair—
Then back from there.
He did not seem to walk—he flew
Those baby steps as if he knew
He could not wait the usual way.
He must begin that very day
To climb up high.
He had to fly!

"When he was four, he had a swing
Made like a plane, a wooden thing
With places where his feet and hands
Could pump and guide to distant lands.
His eyes met mine.
'Twas in their shine
I glimpsed his rapture, saw his thrill;
Sensed his future, dauntless will.
His childish universe was bound
By clouds and air; the earth-caught ground
Was not his place.
He must have space!

"He's flying now. He has his wings.
And tho' they're clever, man-made things,
He has another pair, bomb-proof—
His soul's been growing them since youth.
(I've watched them grow
For years, you know.)
Not feathered like the cherubim,
But oh, so much a part of him!
Not life nor death can stop his flight,
His soul has wings into the night,
Through dark—to dawn—
He shall fly on!"

(This poem is dedicated to the men of the Air Corps—and to all men who fly in defense of their liberty and of the United Nations.)

Picture by Armstrong Roberts

He uses dial telephones and dials as accurately as anybody

"Too much overhead" on Main Street—awnings are the blind pedestrian's worst obstacle

Below, telling time with his educated fingertips

PICTURES FROM RUTH G. NELSON AND MAURICE FRINK, JR.

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high school studies where I had left off two years before, in my junior year. I learned to read and write Braille, to use the typewriter. I played games with the other students, went skiing, skating, tobogganing. I played the trumpet in the band and orchestra, became a far better musician than I had ever been in public school. I took industrial work. I learned how to use tools in carpentry, made articles of furniture far better than anything I would have imagined myself capable of making when I could see. My hands and my mind were working together toward one goal—to make myself independent, capable of holding a job in competition with anyone, to make certain that I would not become a parasite, as I had dreaded.

In college I was back again in my old element. The other students, I was glad to find, soon forgot that I could not see and treated me as they treated each other. I lived with the other students, did the same work, met the same requirements. Like the other students, I wanted to find a place in the world that I could fill, a responsible job. My experiences had shown me that I was capable of living with other people professionally and socially. Some weeks before graduation, I joined two teacher's agencies and wrote many letters of application. *I did not receive a single reply.* One by one I saw my classmates get jobs, but my mail box remained empty. No school board, no high school superintendent considered me capable of holding a position.

I had worked on the college newspaper and literary magazine. My friends and I tried to persuade the editors of two small newspapers to give me a trial. No success. I asked authorities in charge of work for the blind if they knew of any openings, perhaps a civil service position. There were none. Realizing that a higher scholastic degree held the only hope of my ever getting anywhere, of living like other men, I went to the University of Iowa. A year later I had a book contract—the contract for *The World At My Fingertips.*

Friends of mine were more confident than I was that now I would find a job. "Your path will be easy from now on," they said. "Anybody who has written a book won't have any trouble finding a job."

But, even as they spoke, my name, my B.A. degree, my M.A. degree, and my book listed with the teacher's agency were being thoroughly and completely overlooked, even though there was a crying need for teachers all over the nation.

The Head of the University Department in which I studied took a realistic view of the situation. "High school superintendents and college presidents would like to see you get a job," he said, "but they will leave the hiring to someone else."

I had directed my book at the American public. I still had that hope to go on. Their response, I quickly discovered, was far greater than anything I had ever dreamed of. Newspapers all over the country, metropolitan dailies and small town weeklies reviewed it and publicized it. The great radio networks featured it—CBS from Chicago, the Blue Network from New York. Nationally known periodicals told about it in words and in pictures—*Newsweek, Life, The Reader's Digest* condensation. Letters from readers poured in from every state in the Union, from Iceland, from the Aleutian Islands, from Guadalcanal.

But what about the job? In the last chapter of my book I had stated my case, shown that I had the qualifications and the desire to teach in college. It is now more than half a year since the publication of *The World At My Finger Tips.* In all that time not one inquiry, not one offer of a teaching position has come. The public is interested, but the hiring, it seems, is being left "to someone else." An A.B. degree, an M.A. degree, a published book, national publicity, and still no offer of a position. That will give you some idea of what a blind person must face when trying to find employment.

Fortunately, however, opportunity came to me from an unexpected direction. Even before the book was completed, the head of a large lecture bureau granted me a lecture contract extending throughout the coming year. For a year I have security. That, however, does not solve the problem, for *The World At My Finger Tips* is not my story alone. On the contrary, it is the story of thousands of other employable blind persons, who, like myself, are striving to live, to free themselves from dependence and insecurity, to live as richly and fully as other men. In this country today there are more than forty thousand employable blind persons, but only a very few of these are employed.

Once, somewhere, I heard an ex-convict say that the toughest years for the convict were not those he spent in prison; then he had food, clothes and his Mutual Welfare League. The hardest years came when he walked out of prison a free man, anxious to make good, to reinstate himself in society as a good citizen. Then he found himself really up against it, he met an icy indifference to his good intentions, a cruel indifference to the fight he was putting up to go straight. That often crushed him, and drove him back to prison, where at least he had a few friends.

Well—we blind are not ex-convicts, but our experience is a lot like that. Our hardest years are not those in which we are learning to find our way around in the strange new dark world at our fingertips; then we (Continued on page 41)

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have sympathy, help, cooperation. But—after that training period is over, and we try to go to work in society and use that which we have learned—then comes the real heartbreak.

It is not just a question of employability. In factories alone there are twenty different jobs successfully held by blind persons and many more could be found if a concerted effort were made to find them.

A nationally-known munitions company was persuaded recently to employ a blind man in one of their plants. The officials were skeptical at first, but they put him to work priming shells. The first day this man worked twenty-eight per cent of capacity. The fourth day he was working one hundred per cent of capacity. The feeling of accomplishment which that man experienced when he found himself doing the same work and receiving the same wages as his sighted fellow employees was immeasurable.

There are more than one hundred professions and trades in which blind persons are successfully engaged. But blind persons who have managed to find profitable employment are exceptions. For each one who has forced his way up to success there are hundreds of others who, discouraged by finding every door of opportunity closed, are living miserable, wasted lives as charges of the state.

"But," says the American public, "aren't there organizations to help these people, organizations that see to it that blind persons are given work?"

Yes, there are organizations for the blind in this country, more than six hundred in all, but twice that number could not find employment for a single blind person if the American employers did not consider that blind person worth hiring.

"The government is preparing an enormous rehabilitation program for blind soldiers," a social service executive said recently. "After the war there will be a great deal of work to be done rehabilitating these men and finding employment for them."

After the War! Are we trying to deceive ourselves into thinking that we can sit back in our easy chairs now and that after the war some benevolent genie in thin whiskers and tails will pop out of a cloud, set up all the blind in business with a broom machine and a monthly pension of twenty dollars, and that everybody will live happily ever after?

This problem of rehabilitation and placement is not something that can wait for tomorrow. It is with us now—forty thousand employable blind persons are asking for an opportunity to work, to prove that they can be useful, self-supporting members of society. The time to tackle this problem is not tomorrow but today, when there is a crying need for labor, when this nation needs its every ounce of strength.

Every blind person employed now and given the opportunity to prove that he can work as well as anyone means a place for a soldier who returns blind from the war. Leave it until after the war when jobs are scarce, when the public mind is no longer open to suggestion, and we will be floundering in the same disgraceful rut in which we are floundering today.

"Everyone says you're tied to that baby's apron strings!"

1. That remark, coming from Doris, my sister-in-law, really irritated me. And to make it worse she went on about all the special things I had for the baby. "Special this, special that," she said, "and now even a special laxative."

2. "So," I said, "I suppose you think I'm spoiling the child! Well, let me tell you my own doctor told me that a baby needs special care. A baby isn't just a small-sized adult—its system is a lot more delicate and easily upset.

3. "That's why he approved my giving the baby a laxative made especially for children—Fletcher's Castoria. He told me it contains no harsh adult drugs, so it's safe and gentle and mild. I've found that it works wonderfully, too.

4. "And—since you seem to be so interested—Fletcher's Castoria won't upset the baby's stomach or interfere with appetite and digestion. Now do you see why I insist on having a laxative made especially for children?"

5. Later on, our druggist told Doris and me: "I recommend Fletcher's Castoria for babies and children up to 10 years old. Especially at this time of year, when colds are so prevalent, making proper elimination more important."

6. I bought the money-saving Family Size bottle. And, the next time the baby needed a laxative I gave her Castoria. "See," I said to Doris, "it's even pleasant-tasting, so children like to take it." She just said, "Sister, you win!"

Always take a laxative as directed on the package or by your physician.

Chas. H. Fletcher CASTORIA

The SAFE laxative made especially for children.

As the medical profession knows, the chief ingredient in Fletcher's Castoria—senna—has an excellent reputation in medical literature.

Research has proved that senna works mostly in the lower bowel, so it rarely disturbs the appetite or digestion. In regulated doses senna produces easy elimination and at least never gripes or irritates.